

Chicago Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026

District: 6A

Candidates:

Brenda Lee Anderson

Anusha Thotakura

Isaiah White (Did not respond)

Candidate: Brenda Lee Anderson

Question 1: In no more than a paragraph, introduce yourself and why you are running to serve on the Board of Education.

Brenda Lee Anderson: Schools have served as safe haven and sites of possibility for me to explore, learn, and grow—I wouldn't have gotten a whole PhD otherwise! I believe in the potential of public schools to transform lives, just as education has transformed mine. So, I'll bring that vision as Chicago Public Schools Board Member representing District 6A.

Question 2: Many families of students with disabilities talk about the challenges they face trying to navigate the special education system in CPS. Why do you think families are so frustrated?

Brenda Lee Anderson: Families of students with disabilities are tasked with navigating the special education system without the kinds of resources, supports, and structures that ensure equity in access. This differentially burdens these families, and reifies existing racial and economic hierarchies in resources (Cowhy, 2025). Because of policy choices, from Federal to State to Local levels, families are made to figure out and become experts in the allowances, affordances, and limitations to the education that they are morally (and legally!) expecting to be able to access.

Background: Currently, over 60% of CPS schools are not fully ADA accessible. In practice, this means that “neighborhood schools” are not an option for many students with physical disabilities, let alone disabled teachers, disabled parents, disabled voters, or other disabled community members visiting our schools. The 2023 CPS Facilities Master Plan identifies building accessibility as an important priority, but the district has not adopted a roadmap or plan to achieve better building accessibility.

Question 3: What steps should the district take to address a lack of accessibility in its buildings?

Brenda Lee Anderson: *No Answer Provided

Background: A core tenet of The Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is “the right to a free and appropriate public education in the [least restrictive environment](#).”

Despite this, CPS has a history of separating students with disabilities from their peers instead of including them in general education classrooms. A [1998 court settlement](#) (Corey H.) required CPS to move toward *inclusion*, meaning students with disabilities should be taught alongside their non-disabled peers whenever they can make meaningful progress that way, rather than being placed in separate, more restrictive settings.

Since 2023, the number of “cluster classrooms” (separate, self-contained classrooms specifically for students with disabilities, apart from general education) has increased by over 250%.

Question 4: As a board member, what questions would you ask to understand why the district is placing so many more students in these separate classrooms instead of general education settings?

Brenda Lee Anderson: I would ask for data and evidence to chart the trajectory of cluster classroom placements. Which students are in these settings, when were they assigned to these settings, and are there demographic and/or geographic patterns in this? What are the infrastructural and administrative realities across these schools (and does this differ)? What are parents and caregivers sharing about their experiences with their students who were or were not placed in these classrooms? Put another way, I will ask the questions that will help address root causes and not just the symptoms of this increase in cluster classroom placement.

Question 5: In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of expanding cluster programming for students?

Brenda Lee Anderson: *No Answer Provided

Background: Federal law allows certain students with intellectual disabilities to stay in school until they are 22. Ages 18-22 are known as the *transition years* where students focus on employment and independent living skills. Many students and families fear the “[disability cliff](#),” or lack of resources and career support that comes when students age out of the school system at the age of 22.

Question 6: What can be done to ensure students with disabilities are well equipped for success in their career and lives after graduation?

Brenda Lee Anderson: This combines two of my core campaign tenets: to champion holistic student supports, and foster meaningful community partnerships. I see holistic student supports to mean meeting resources to students' wide-ranging needs, and pairing this with coordinating with community partners across the region to provide meaningful pathways after students age out of CPS.

Background: According to the 2024-25 [Illinois State Report Card](#), 42% of CPS students overall were proficient in English language arts and 27% in math on the state test. Among students with IEPs (formal plans for students with disabilities), only 10.5% were proficient in ELA and 7.1% in math.

Question 7: What is your top priority for improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities in CPS?

Brenda Lee Anderson: CPS has the potential to serve as a model district for the care and attention we pay to our students with disabilities, and I commit to advocating for the resources that I believe are a necessary, though not sufficient, condition to build towards educational systems that meet their transformative potential. So, my first campaign priority is to reimagine the CPS budget to fully fund our school and to provide the resources needed to support our students' diverse needs, very much including students with disabilities. This means advocating for the actual resources needed to meet the unfunded mandate that IDEA represents--securing additional Federal, State, and Local resources to be able to support and improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities in CPS.

Candidate: Anusha Thotakura

Question 1: In no more than a paragraph, introduce yourself and why you are running to serve on the Board of Education.

Anusha Thotakura: I am a former bilingual middle school math teacher, current public policy non-profit Executive Director, and current member of the Chicago Board of Education representing District 6A. I am running for another term because I believe every child deserves access to a high-quality public education, regardless of ZIP code or life circumstance. As a Board member, I have focused on improving academic achievement, strengthening school facilities, and expanding opportunities for students, and have made improving special education one of my top priorities. I believe students with disabilities should have the same opportunities to learn, participate, pursue careers, and thrive as every other CPS student, and that requires both accountability and sustained investment in the people and infrastructure that make inclusion possible.

Question 2: Many families of students with disabilities talk about the challenges they face trying to navigate the special education system in CPS. Why do you think families are so frustrated?

Anusha Thotakura: Families are frustrated because CPS too often makes them fight through a complicated system to obtain services their children are legally entitled to receive. From transportation and staffing shortages to delays in evaluations, placements, related services, and communication, families can experience the system as fragmented and reactive rather than coordinated around their

child's needs. There are also significant capacity challenges: CPS has struggled to recruit and retain special education teachers, SECAs, related-service professionals, and other staff, and those shortages can translate directly into missed services and greater pressure on families. Families should not have to become experts in CPS bureaucracy or fight their school system just to ensure their child's IEP is implemented. CPS needs clearer communication, reliable points of contact, better tracking of whether services are actually being delivered, and greater transparency when the district cannot meet a student's needs on time.

Most importantly, families of students with disabilities need to be treated as partners in their children's education. Their experiences should inform Board oversight and district policy.

Background: Currently, over 60% of CPS schools are not fully ADA accessible. In practice, this means that “neighborhood schools” are not an option for many students with physical disabilities, let alone disabled teachers, disabled parents, disabled voters, or other disabled community members visiting our schools. The 2023 CPS Facilities Master Plan identifies building accessibility as an important priority, but the district has not adopted a roadmap or plan to achieve better building accessibility.

Question 3: What steps should the district take to address a lack of accessibility in its buildings?

Anusha Thotakura: CPS needs a specific, measurable, long-term accessibility plan with clear timelines, priorities, and accountability. The goal should be to move meaningfully toward full accessibility across the district rather than addressing accessibility only when an individual student happens to need an accommodation. That plan should identify the accessibility needs of every school, prioritize buildings where students and families are currently being denied meaningful access to their neighborhood schools, and establish measurable benchmarks for improvements.

As I have said previously, CPS's aging infrastructure makes long-term capital planning essential, and capital planning should incorporate accessibility from the beginning rather than treating it as an afterthought. But we also need to recognize that accessibility is broader than simply providing a ramp or first-floor entrance. Students with disabilities deserve access to the full educational experience—including classrooms, libraries, laboratories, gyms, auditoriums, cafeterias, extracurricular activities, and career and technical education programs. I would continue pushing for accessibility to be incorporated into those capital investments.

Background: A core tenet of The Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is “the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.”

Despite this, CPS has a history of separating students with disabilities from their peers instead of including them in general education classrooms. A 1998 court settlement (Corey H.) required CPS to move toward *inclusion*, meaning students with disabilities should be taught alongside their

non-disabled peers whenever they can make meaningful progress that way, rather than being placed in separate, more restrictive settings.

Since 2023, the number of "cluster classrooms" (separate, self-contained classrooms specifically for students with disabilities, apart from general education) has increased by over 250%.

Question 4: As a board member, what questions would you ask to understand why the district is placing so many more students in these separate classrooms instead of general education settings?

Anusha Thotakura: I will continue to ask the District to provide the Board with more information, with a detailed breakdown of the increase, including:

- Where are the new cluster classrooms located, and which students are being placed in them?
- Are placements being driven by student need, staffing shortages, lack of related services, insufficient classroom supports, or some combination of these factors?
- How many students who could make meaningful progress in less restrictive environments are being placed in more restrictive settings?
- What supports were attempted in general education classrooms before a more restrictive placement was made?
- Are schools adequately staffed with special education teachers, SECAs, related-service professionals, and other support staff?
- How has the district's recruitment and retention of special education staff changed since the pandemic?
- Are there geographic or demographic disparities in where students with disabilities are being placed?
- Are Black students, Latino students, multilingual learners, or other groups disproportionately represented in restrictive placements?
- How is CPS measuring whether students in cluster classrooms are making meaningful academic and social progress?
- What is the district doing to ensure that students can move to less restrictive environments when appropriate?

Question 5: In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of expanding cluster programming for students?

Anusha Thotakura: Cluster programming can be appropriate for some students when their individual needs cannot be adequately met in a less restrictive environment. A smaller, specialized setting can provide more intensive support, specialized instruction, and staff expertise for students with significant needs.

But cluster programming also carries serious risks if it becomes a substitute for providing appropriate supports in general education classrooms. Overreliance on separate classrooms can limit students' access to their peers, rigorous academic opportunities, extracurricular activities, and the broader

school community. It can also undermine the principle of educating students in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs.

The question should therefore not be whether cluster programming is inherently good or bad. The question is whether each student's placement is individualized, legally appropriate, and based on what will allow that student to make meaningful progress. CPS should make sure that restrictive placements are not being driven by staffing shortages or inadequate resources in general education classrooms.

Background: Federal law allows certain students with intellectual disabilities to stay in school until they are 22. Ages 18-22 are known as the *transition years* where students focus on employment and independent living skills. Many students and families fear the “[disability cliff](#),” or lack of resources and career support that comes when students age out of the school system at the age of 22.

Question 6: What can be done to ensure students with disabilities are well equipped for success in their career and lives after graduation?

Anusha Thotakura: Transition planning should begin well before a student reaches 18. Students with disabilities should have meaningful access to Career and Technical Education, dual-credit opportunities, internships, work-based learning, career counseling, and other experiences that help them understand what comes next.

CPS should make sure families receive clear information about these opportunities and that students with disabilities are actively encouraged and supported in accessing them. The district should also strengthen partnerships with employers, community colleges, apprenticeship programs, workforce organizations, and other community partners. I would particularly like to see stronger connections between special education and the career pathways CPS is developing in areas such as construction, clean energy, technology, and other high-demand fields. Students with disabilities should not be tracked away from these opportunities simply because they receive special education services.

Finally, transition planning should include more than employment. Students should have opportunities to develop independent living skills, understand available adult services, and build the self-advocacy skills they will need after leaving CPS.

Background: According to the 2024-25 [Illinois State Report Card](#), 42% of CPS students overall were proficient in English language arts and 27% in math on the state test. Among students with IEPs (formal plans for students with disabilities), only 10.5% were proficient in ELA and 7.1% in math.

Question 7: What is your top priority for improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities in CPS?

Anusha Thotakura: My top priority is making sure students with disabilities have the people, instructional resources, and learning environments they need to succeed academically alongside their peers whenever appropriate. This also means developmental screenings for our youngest learners to get the support they need to succeed. The proficiency gap between students with IEPs and CPS students overall shows that we cannot accept the status quo. Improving outcomes requires addressing the underlying capacity of the system: recruiting and retaining high-quality special education teachers and support staff, ensuring IEPs are implemented consistently, providing evidence-based literacy and math instruction, improving attendance and transportation, and giving families timely and understandable information.

I would also make sure that improving special education is connected to the broader academic agenda rather than treated as a separate issue. Students with disabilities should have access to rigorous instruction, advanced coursework, extracurricular activities, CTE, and postsecondary pathways.

Finally, we need to measure whether our investments are actually improving outcomes. The Board should regularly review academic growth, graduation and postsecondary outcomes, service delivery, restrictive placements, staffing vacancies, and family experiences. The goal is not simply compliance with the law; it is ensuring that students with disabilities are genuinely able to learn, participate, and succeed.